

A message from King County Fire District 41 Commissioners Jim Lloyd, chairman, Richard Krogh and Toby Nixon

With the goal of improving life-saving fire and emergency medical service in the Finn Hill area, Fire District 41 has been working for almost eight years on a plan to consolidate two existing fire stations into one more centrally located station so fire fighters and medics can reach more people faster than now. One of the two current stations that would be replaced, Station 25, was built 50 years ago when Finn Hill was mostly rural. Now its location is too far south and west to meet current response time standards for east Finn Hill and the north part of the district. Station 24 on NE 84th could serve those areas, but revenue shortfalls have resulted in the elimination of daytime staff and will end stipends to the volunteers who staff the station at night. Strategically locating a new station would optimize response times, save money, and meet current national standards.

As commissioners we have wrestled with three choices: accept the reduction in services, consolidate services at Finn Hill Jr. High School at a premium cost or consolidate at a less expensive, flat site in a partnership that adds an amenity for Big Finn Hill Park users.

The district did a lot of work exploring the possibility of locating a new station on surplus property at the junior high school but the terrain (steep slopes and wetlands) would make it very expensive to build there – at least a million dollars more than if we use the potential site we have identified in Big Finn Hill Park at 138th Place and Juanita Dr. Although we haven't made a final decision to even build a station, we haven't found any other site close enough to Juanita Drive and the center of Finn Hill that doesn't have either higher land acquisition costs or higher building costs due to the terrain.

Big Finn Hill Park is a regional park, which in recent years has developed a major trail system in coordination with St Edwards State Park on the west side of Juanita Drive. Unfortunately, King County Parks has lacked funding to build a parking lot to serve the park, and mountain bikers use the QFC parking lot or compete for spaces in the crowded lots near the ball fields. Last year we began exploring the possibility of using 1.8 acres of this 218 acre park for a fire station and a joint parking area, which would be available for trail users. After the experience with unexpected costs on the school site, we wanted to know more about the feasibility of such a project before getting too far into planning. So, we directed investigations into possible restrictions due to wetlands, traffic engineering, zoning, utilities, storm water run-off and soils conditions, asked our architect to provide a feasible site lay-out and cost estimates and held discussions with King County Parks and the City about partnering on such a project. This preliminary investigation has brought us to a point where we can determine if such a project is feasible and explain it to the public.

Big Finn Hill Park site is feasible only if the kind of expensive and invasive work needed at the school site can be avoided. We stopped considering the Finn Hill Jr. High School site when projected costs increased to more than \$4.5 million. We will soon have information for the public discussion about the new potential site where costs are estimated at roughly \$3.5 million. We have more than \$1 million in reserve for the project and the sale of the two existing stations would help pay for the new station. Together, they would cover most, but not all of the costs.

Two of us live in the Finn Hill area, use the park ourselves, and we all very much appreciate the beauty of the area. That's why, if we move forward, we would make sure the station is positioned far enough back to preserve all of the trees and natural vegetation along Juanita Drive and supplement with additional native plants that would screen the station even further. The structure and parking could be designed so that they are unobtrusive--it would not look like other brick and concrete fire stations in the district. Throughout the remainder of the site, the intent would be to preserve as many existing significant trees and natural vegetation as possible.

While the recent focus has been on the potential site for a new fire station, the real issue is do we want to give fire fighters and medics the best chance of reducing damage to property and increasing survival of people suffering traumatic injury or sudden illness. We agree with the Kirkland Fire Chief and favor strategically locating a new station to improve response times. There will be trade-offs with any site for a new station but choosing to strategically consolidate service will give fire fighters and medics an advantage in reaching us when we need them. We are increasing our outreach efforts to all Fire District 41 residents to discuss these issues. We have briefed the Kirkland City Council twice and last December met with the Denny Creek Neighborhood Alliance and the Evergreen Mountain Bike Alliance about the possibility the park site might be workable for the proposed fire station.